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#37

MARVEL® COMICS GROUP



DOCTOR STRANGE

**FEAR,
THE FINAL
VICTOR!**



Once he was a man like most *others*— a worldly man, seduced and jaded by *material* things. But then he discovered the *separate* reality, where *sorcery* and *men's souls* shaped the forces that shape our *lives*. In that instant, he was *born again*, to become a man like no *other*!

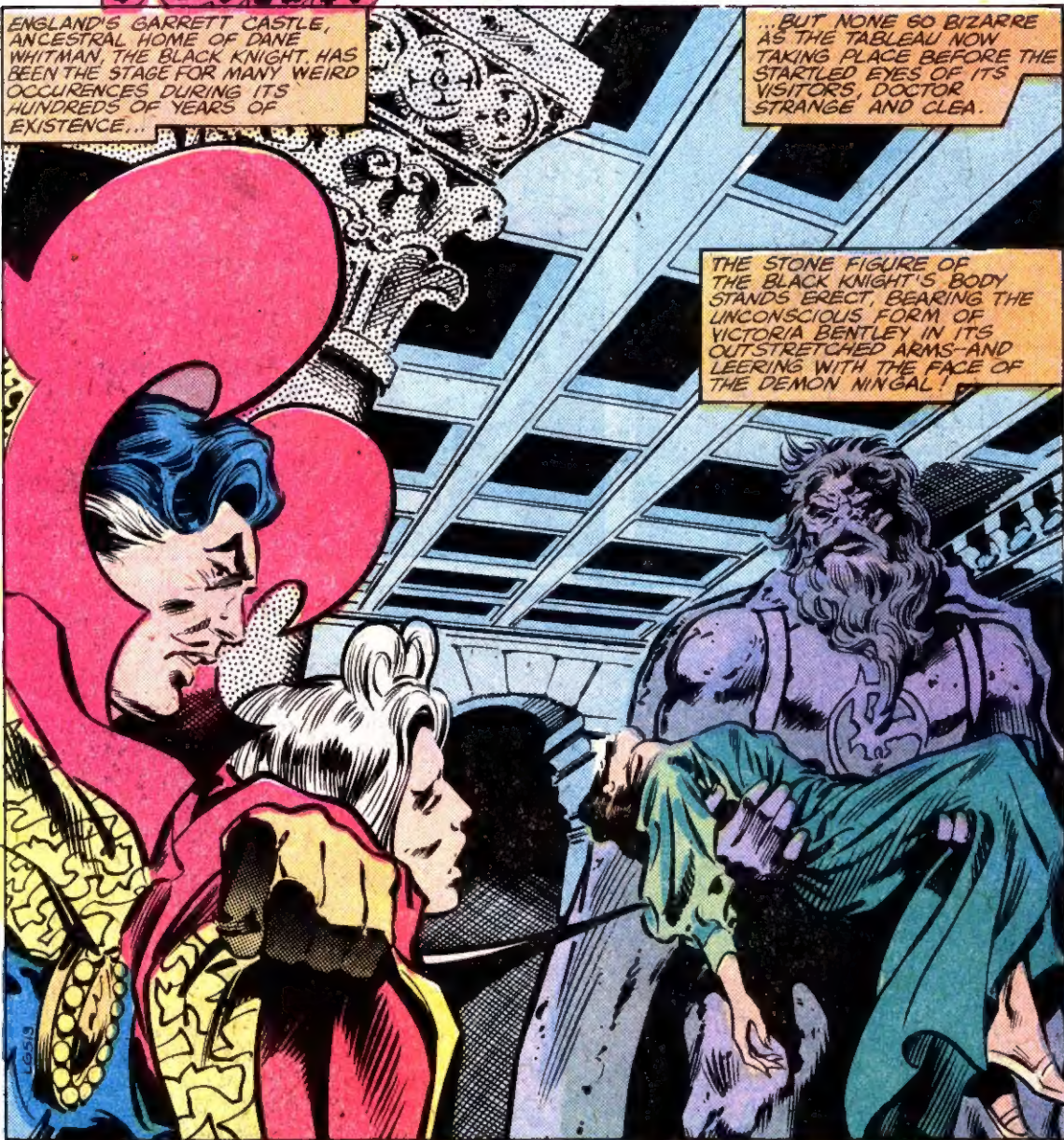
Stan Lee PRESENTS: **Dr. STRANGE** MASTER OF THE MYSTIC ARTS!™

AND **FEAR** THE FINAL VICTOR!

ENGLAND'S GARRETT CASTLE, ANCESTRAL HOME OF DANE WHITMAN, THE BLACK KNIGHT, HAS BEEN THE STAGE FOR MANY WEIRD OCCURRENCES DURING ITS HUNDREDS OF YEARS OF EXISTENCE...

...BUT NONE SO BIZARRE AS THE TABLEAU NOW TAKING PLACE BEFORE THE STARTLED EYES OF ITS VISITORS, DOCTOR STRANGE AND CLEA.

THE STONE FIGURE OF THE BLACK KNIGHT'S BODY STANDS ERECT, BEARING THE UNCONSCIOUS FORM OF VICTORIA BENTLEY IN ITS OUTSTRETCHED ARMS—AND LEERING WITH THE FACE OF THE DEMON NINGAL!



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I, NINGAL, NOW POSSESS THIS BODY. STRANGE-- THE BODY OF YOUR LOST FRIEND--DANE WHITMAN TURNED TO STONE BY AN ENCHANTMENT MONTHS AGO.



I DO NOT FEAR YOUR THREATENING GESTURES, FOR YOU WOULD NO MORE HARM THIS GRANITE SHELL THAN YOU WOULD YOUR DISCIPLE, CLEA.

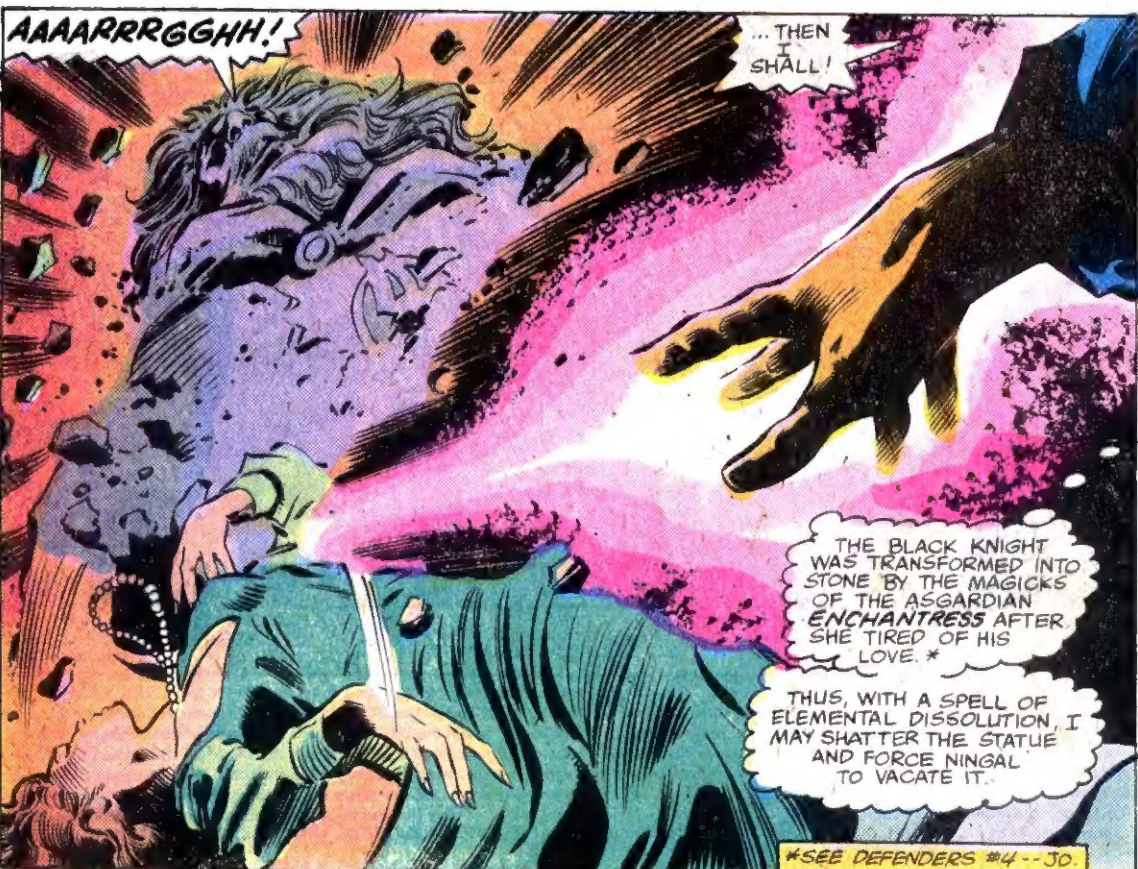
NOT SO, NINGAL. ONCE I REASSEMBLED THE FRAGMENTS OF THE KNIGHT'S BODY AND MADE THEM WHOLE.*

AND IF I MUST SHATTER THAT CORPOREAL CASING TO REMOVE YOUR UNHOLY PRESENCE FROM IT...



*TWO ISSUES AGO, FOOTNOTE FOLLOWERS-- JO.

AAAARRRGHH!



... THEN I SHALL!

THE BLACK KNIGHT WAS TRANSFORMED INTO STONE BY THE MAGICKS OF THE ASGARDIAN ENCHANTRESS AFTER SHE TIRED OF HIS LOVE.*

THUS, WITH A SPELL OF ELEMENTAL DISSOLUTION, I MAY SHATTER THE STATUE AND FORCE NINGAL TO VACATE IT.

*SEE DEFENDERS #4-- JO.

OHH, STEPHEN. I-I'M SO SORRY
FOR WHAT HAPPENED

IF ONLY I HADN'T
PRIED THE LID OFF
THAT CRATE AND
GIVEN NINGAL
ACCESS TO DANE'S
BODY, HE MIGHT
NOT HAVE BEEN
ABLE TO POSSESS
IT.

NONSENSE, VICTORIA.
YOUR ACTIONS WERE
WELL-INTENTIONED,
I'M SURE.

BUT-- YOU'RE
TREMBLING.
LET ME
HOLD YOU A
MOMENT.

*LAST ISSUE, FOLKS--
BRING 'EM UP TO-
DATE DUFFY.

SO, MISS BENTLEY... ONCE
AGAIN YOU SEEK COMFORT
IN MY LOVER'S ARMS. IS
IT OUT OF FEAR-- OR
SOMETHING MORE?

ER-- PERHAPS
CLEA WILL HELP YOU
TO A CHAIR WHILE I
EXAMINE THE FRAGMENTS.

BUT BEFORE THE MAGE CAN EXTRICATE HIM-
SELF FROM THE YOUNG HEIRESS'S EMBRACE,
THE SHATTERED STONE BEHIND HIM BEGINS
TO RE-FORM...

...SILENTLY--UNBELIEVABLY,
OF ITS OWN VOLITION...

...UNTIL THE JAGGED COUNTENANCE
OF NINGAL EXISTS ONCE AGAIN, ITS
EYES BLAZING WITH FERAL INTENSITY.



AND IN THE HALLS OF FEAR,
DIMENSIONS AWAY, THE AWESOME
DWELLER IN DARKNESS, PRIME
MOVER OF ALL THAT HAS TAKEN
PLACE, VIEWS THE EARTHLY
SCENE WITH MALIGN CONTENT-
MENT.



THE SEEDS I HAVE PLANTED
HAVE FAST TAKEN ROOT. STRANGE
DOUBTS HIMSELF NOW, AND HIS
ABILITY TO COPE. FOR A MYSTIC,
SUCH FESTERING THOUGHTS
ARE THE FIRST STEP
TOWARD DEATH.

PARANOIA GNAWS AT THE
FRAYED EDGES OF HIS MIND.
HE FIGHTS BRAVELY, THOUGH
HE GROPES IN VAIN FOR A
GOAL TO GIVE PURPOSE TO
HIS STRIVINGS.

THE THREE THRALLS
I HAVE USED, **DREAM
WEAVER**, THE **DEMONLUDI**,
AND NOW **NINGAL** HAVE
EACH TAKEN A TOLL
ON THE SORCERER.

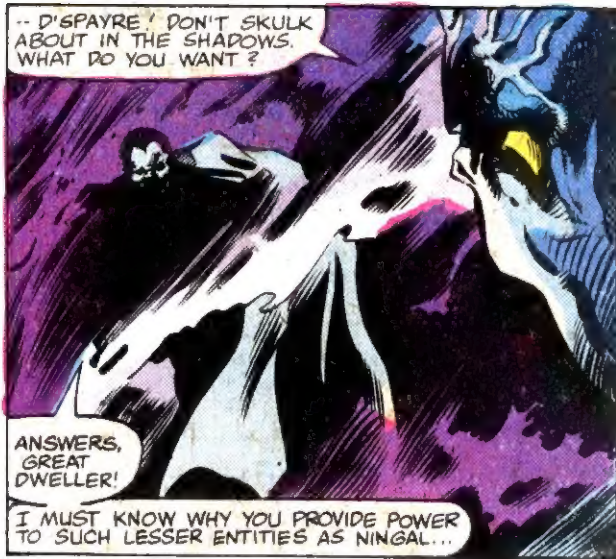
EACH HAS PLUCKED
AT HIS RESISTANCE--
CONFUSED HIM--
FRUSTRATED HIM--
AND BROUGHT HIM
CLOSE TO--



-- D'SPAYRE! DON'T SKULK
ABOUT IN THE SHADOWS.
WHAT DO YOU WANT?

ANSWERS,
GREAT
DWELLER!

I MUST KNOW WHY YOU PROVIDE POWER
TO SUCH LESSER ENTITIES AS NINGAL...



... WHEN MY
MEREST TOUCH
WOULD ACCOMPLISH
SO MUCH MORE?



STRANGE IS A FORMIDABLE ADVERSARY, D' SPAYRE.

HE HAS ENCOUNTERED MANY OF THE **CONCEPTUAL** BEINGS IN THE OMNIVERSE--AND DEVELOPED AN ORDERED VIEW OF THE WORLD BASED UPON HIS EXPERIENCES.

BUT I SHALL CRUMBLE HIS NEAT STRUCTURE, AND WITH IT HIS OH-SO-IMPORTANT PLACE IN THE SCHEME OF THINGS.

AND I SHALL DO IT SUBTLY, BEHIND THE SCENES, THROUGH THE MANIPULATION OF PAWNS--LIKE NINGAL.



ENOUGH OF THIS, FOR THERE ARE INTRIGUES WITHIN INTRIGUES, WITNESS...



AT THE DWELLER'S COMMAND, A COSMIC WINDOW OPENS ONTO EARTH, THROUGH WHICH HE VIEWS AMERICAN ADVENTURER MURDOCH ADAMS.

... AS HE RELAXES NEAR A WARM FIRE IN THE LONDON APARTMENT OF HIS STAR-CROSSED LOVER, MARCIA TRENT.

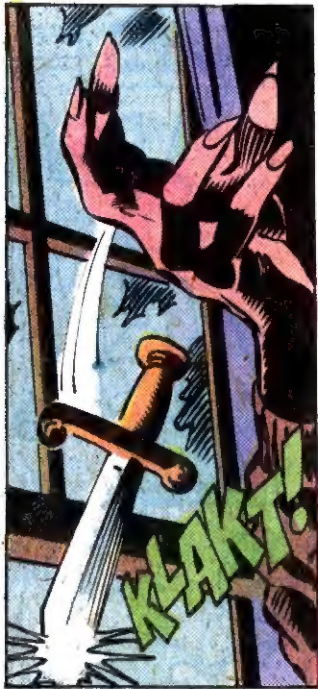


YOU LOOK TROUBLED, MY LOVE.

I AM, MARCIA. I CAN'T FORGET WHAT'S HAPPENED IN THE LAST FEW DAYS...MY AWAKENING FROM SUSPENDED ANIMATION IN **ANOTHER DIMENSION**-- THE MEETING WITH DOCTOR STRANGE IN AMERICA--

--AND NOW SEEING YOU AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MONTHS.





YOU SEE, D'SPAYRE, STRANGE ANTICIPATED HER TREACHERY AND PREPARED ADAMS FOR IT. HE IS A WORTHY ANTAGONIST IN ALL RESPECTS.

NOW DO YOU SEE WHY I HAVE DONE AS I HAVE?

BUT NOW I AM FREE OF HIM. FOREVER. GOODBYE, MY LOVE...

YES, GREAT DWELLER. BUT WHEN WILL THE PLAY BE OVER?

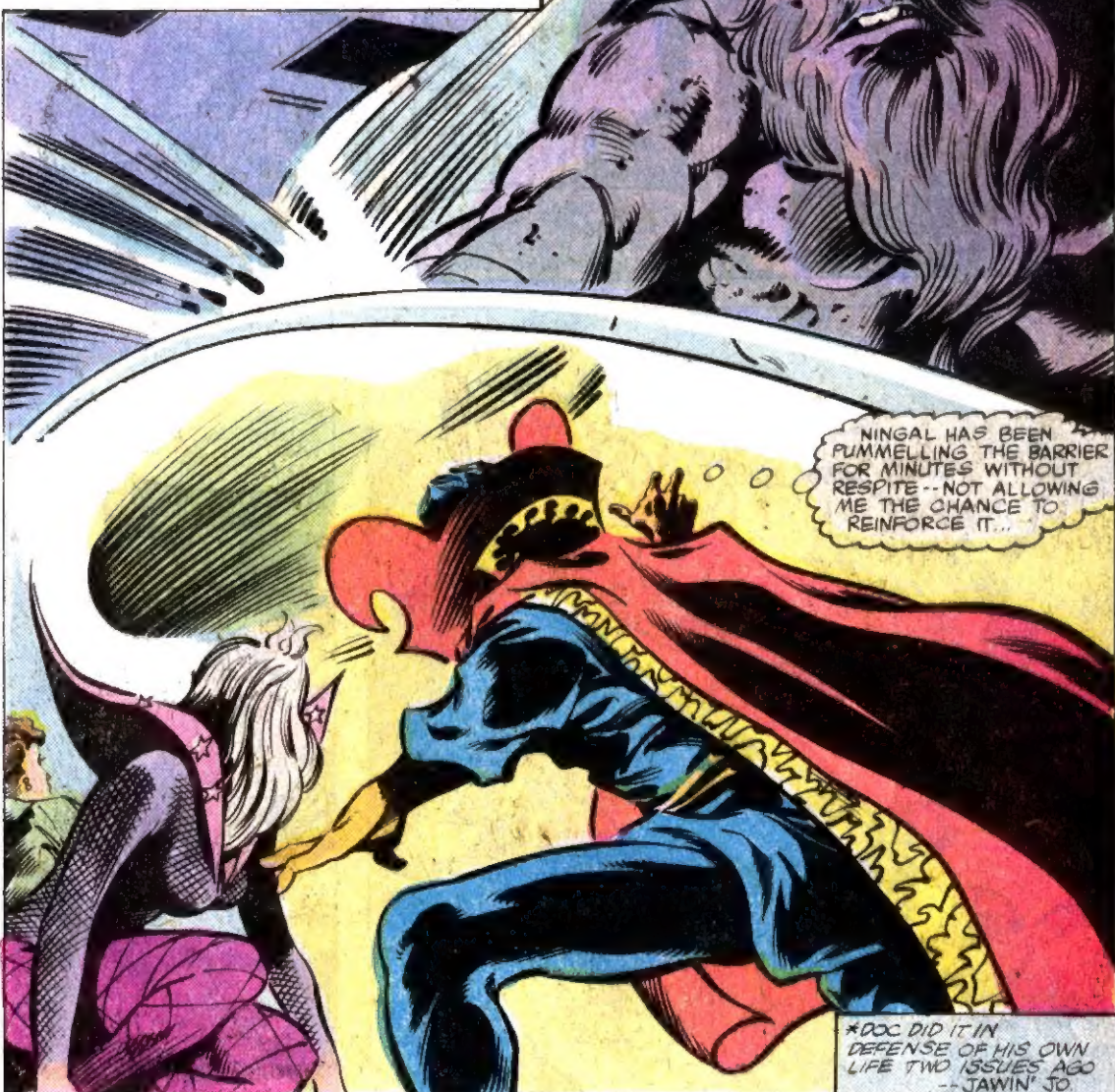


THE CURTAIN IS RISING
ON THE FINAL ACT
EVEN AS WE SPEAK.



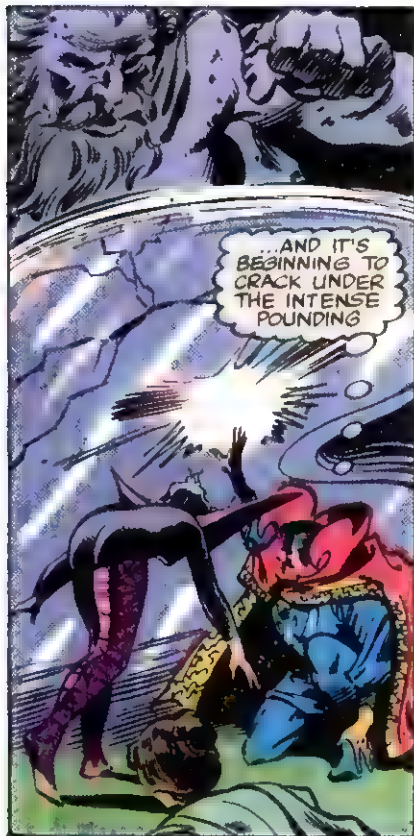
CURSE YOU, MORTAL!
SHOW YOURSELF!

CRAWL OUT FROM YOUR
CONFINING SHIELD SO
THAT I MAY METE OUT
THE PUNISHMENT YOU
DESERVE FOR ENDING
THE LIFE OF MY DEMON-
BROTHER LUDI.*



NINGAL HAS BEEN
PUMPELLING THE BARRIER
FOR MINUTES WITHOUT
RESPIRE--NOT ALLOWING
ME THE CHANCE TO
REINFORCE IT...

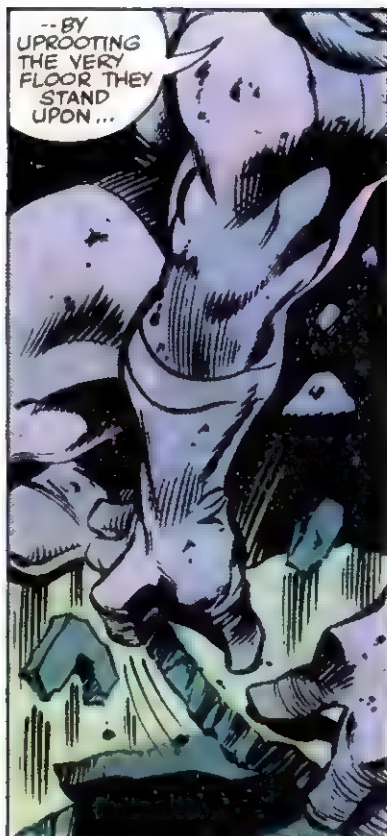
*DOC DID IT IN
DEFENSE OF HIS OWN
LIFE TWO ISSUES AGO
--JAWIN' JO



...AND IT'S
BEGINNING TO
CRACK UNDER
THE INTENSE
POUNDING



BAH! I WEARY OF
SUCH GAMES. PERHAPS
THERE IS A QUICKER
ROUTE TO MY VICTIMS--



--BY
ROOTING
THE VERY
FLOOR THEY
STAND
UPON...



--AND BELOW WHICH
THEIR ACCURSED BARRIER
DOES NOT EXIST.

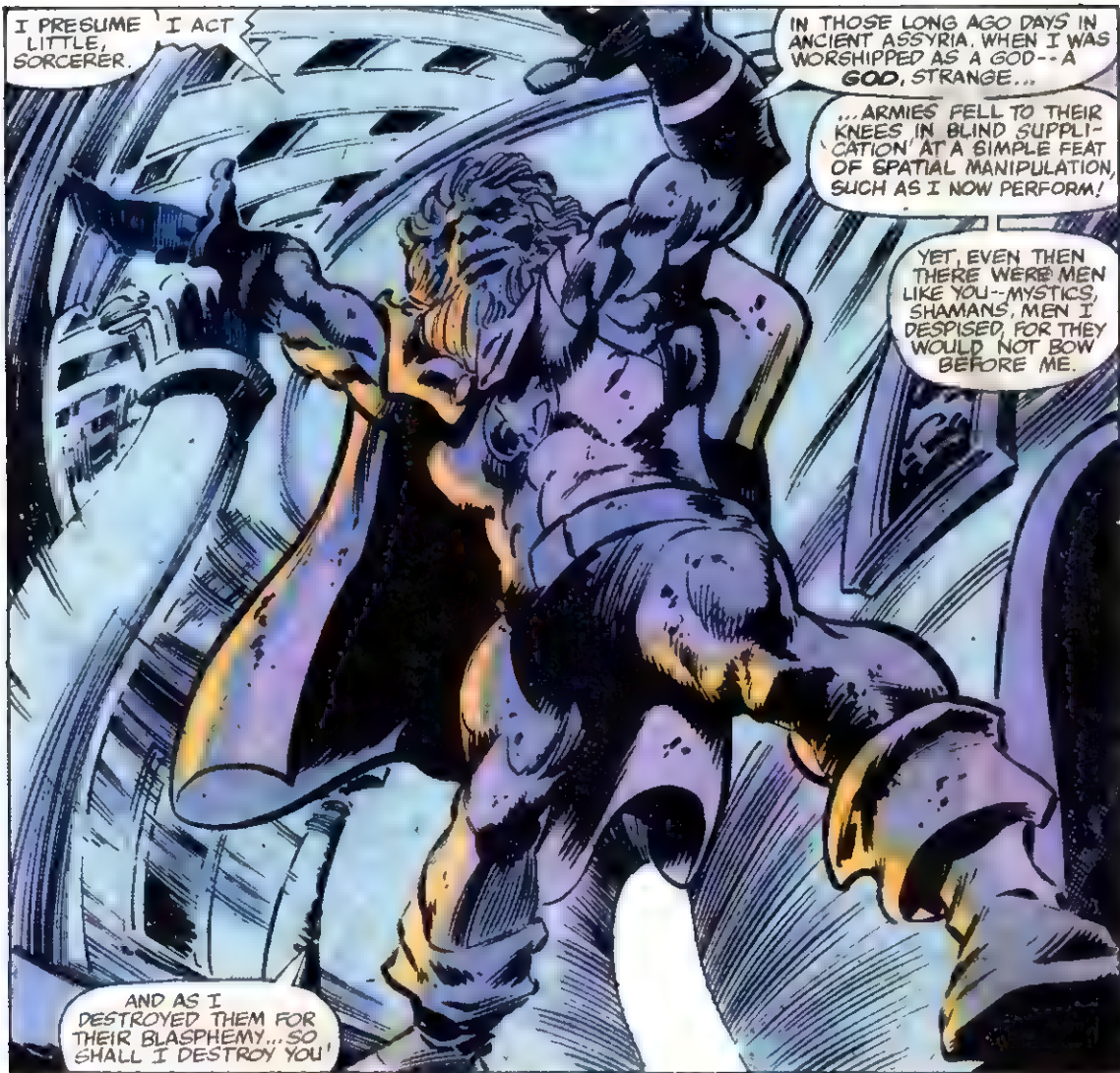
STEPHEN!

I'M
LOSING MY
FOOTINGS...
CAN'T
CONCENTRATE
--THE SHIELD
IS
DISSIPATING.



YOU STAND WITHIN THE
CONFINES OF YOUR OWN
GRAVE, STRANGE HOW
FITTING THAT YOU
SHALL BE BURIED
ALONGSIDE YOUR
BELOVED CLEA,
WHO YOU SOUGHT
TO PROTECT.

YOU
PRESUME
TOO MUCH,
DEMON.



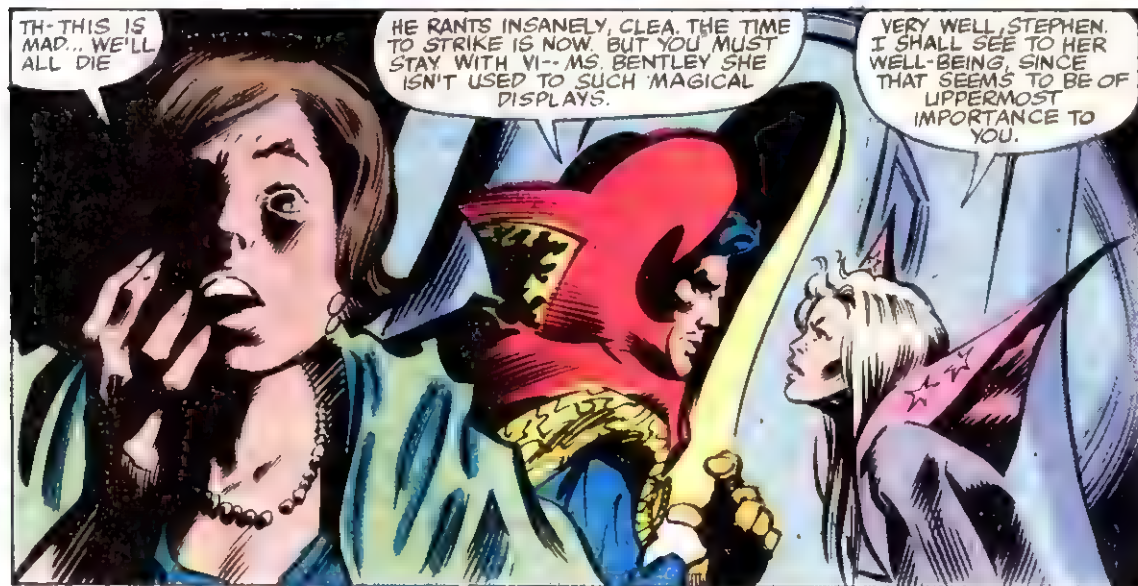
I PRESUME I ACT
LITTLE, SORCERER.

IN THOSE LONG AGO DAYS IN
ANCIENT ASSYRIA, WHEN I WAS
WORSHIPPED AS A GOD--A
GOD, STRANGE...

...ARMIES FELL TO THEIR
KNEES IN BLIND SUPPLI-
CATION AT A SIMPLE FEAT
OF SPATIAL MANIPULATION,
SUCH AS I NOW PERFORM!

YET, EVEN THEN
THERE WERE MEN
LIKE YOU--MYSTICS,
SHAMANS, MEN I
DESPISED, FOR THEY
WOULD NOT BOW
BEFORE ME.

AND AS I
DESTROYED THEM FOR
THEIR BLASPHEMY...SO
SHALL I DESTROY YOU!



TH-THIS IS
MAD... WE'LL
ALL DIE

HE RANTS INSANELY, CLEA. THE TIME
TO STRIKE IS NOW, BUT YOU MUST
STAY WITH VI--MS. BENTLEY SHE
ISN'T USED TO SUCH 'MAGICAL
DISPLAYS.

VERY WELL, STEPHEN.
I SHALL SEE TO HER
WELL-BEING, SINCE
THAT SEEMS TO BE OF
UPPERMOST
IMPORTANCE TO
YOU.

LIKE SOME QUICKLY DARTING INSECT, DOCTOR STRANGE STREAKS UPWARD TOWARD HIS GARGANTUAN ANTAGONIST.



-- WHO WHEELS UPON HIM WITH ALMOST ANIMALASTIC ANTICIPATION



STUNG TIME AND TIME AGAIN BY BURSTS OF OCCULT FORCE, NINGAL STRIKES FUTILELY AT HIS DIMINUTIVE ENEMY, WHO NEVER IS QUITE WHERE HE SEEMS TO BE.

THE DEMON'S FURY GROWS WITH EACH ANNOYING ASSAULT.



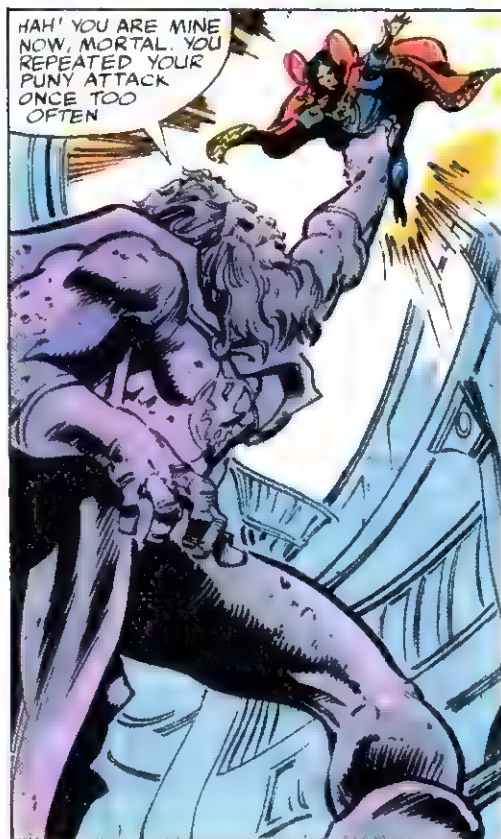
OH, CLEA, WE MUST HELP STEPHEN PLEASE!

"WE" MAY BEST AID HIM, MS. BENTLEY BY STAYING HERE--



MMMPPPPFFF

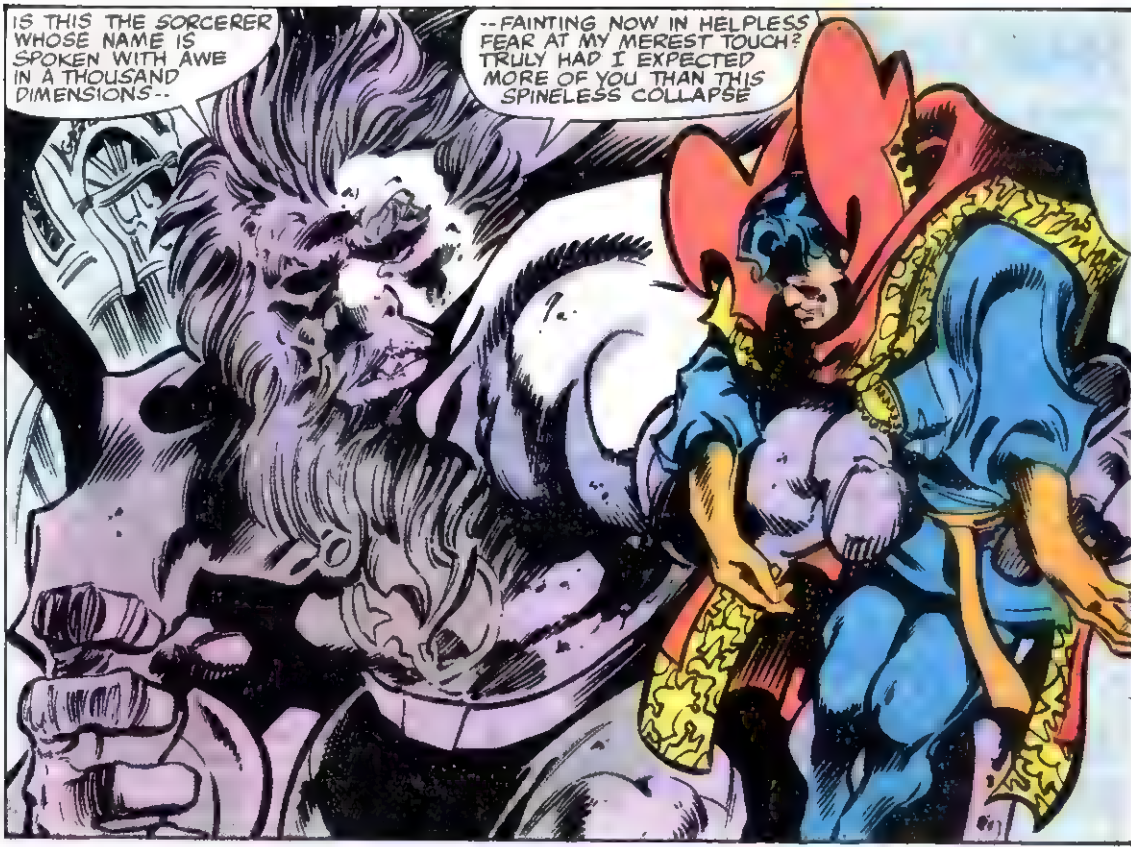
AND KEEPING SILENT.



HAH! YOU ARE MINE NOW, MORTAL. YOU REPEATED YOUR PUNY ATTACK ONCE TOO OFTEN

IS THIS THE SORCERER
WHOSE NAME IS
SPOKEN WITH AWE
IN A THOUSAND
DIMENSIONS--

--FAINING NOW IN HELPLESS
FEAR AT MY MEREST TOUCH?
TRULY HAD I EXPECTED
MORE OF YOU THAN THIS
SPINELESS COLLAPSE



YOUR IGNORANCE IS
EXCEEDED ONLY BY YOUR
EGO, DEMONIC ONE, AND
YOU POSSESS BOTH
ATTRIBUTES IN
ABUNDANCE

EH?

ARE YOU SO EASILY FOOLED BY
PARLOR TRICKS, NINGAL? YOU
HAVE DEFEATED NOTHING
SAVE AN EMPTY PHYSICAL
SHELL



I FACE YOU NOW
IN MY GHOSTLY
ASTRAL FORM!
YOUR ERROR WILL
BE YOUR UNDOING!

THEN I SHALL
TAKE STEPS TO
RECTIFY THAT
ERROR.



NOW.

AAARGH! SOME
ACCURSED
FORCE STAYS
MY HAND!

THERE
ARE POWERS
BEYOND WHAT
YOU MAY EVEN
CONCEIVE, DEMON.



POWERS
SUCH
AS--



-- THE ALL-CONSUMING
MAELSTROM OF MADNESS!

HELPLESS, THE STARTLED
NINGAL IS SENT REELING BY
THE SWIRLING VORTEX OF
ARCAINE ENERGY.



UNTIL, AT LENGTH, WHEN
THE MYSTIC UPHEAVAL
SUBSIDES, AND THE
DEMON'S STRENGTH
IS SPENT...

YOU ARE
DEFEATED
NINGAL. NOW
SPEAK. WHAT
IS BEHIND
YOUR
CONTINUED
ATTACKS?

I'LL TELL YOU
NOTHING, STRANGE.
MY SECRETS LAY
WITHIN ME... BEYOND
YOUR MEAGER
REACH.

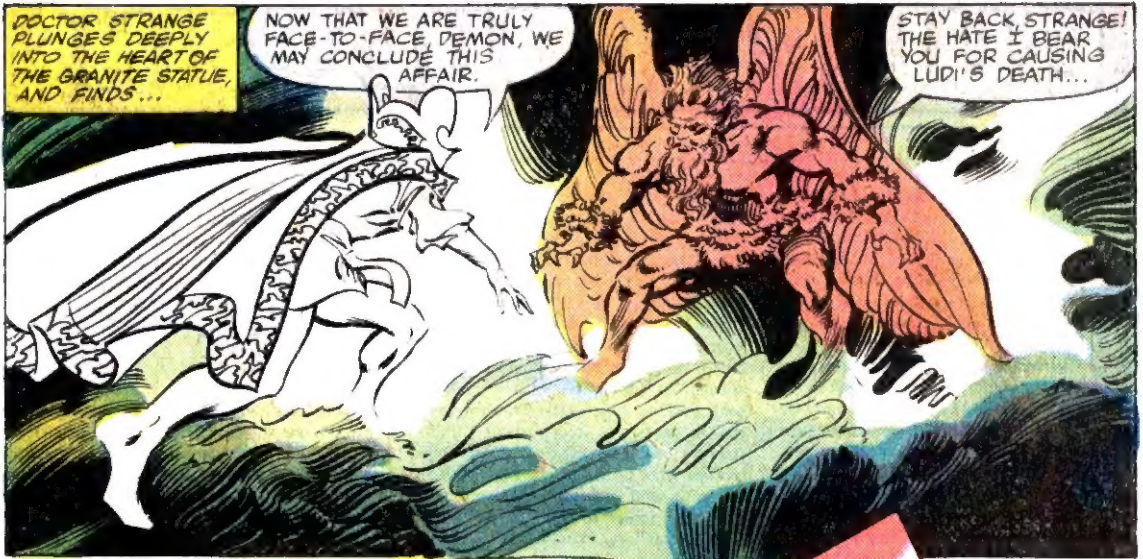


THEN I SHALL SEND
MY ASTRAL FORM
INTO YOUR STONY
SHELL AND SEEK
THE LIFE ESSENCE
OF THE ONE WHO
PLAGUES ME.

DOCTOR STRANGE
PLUNGES DEEPLY
INTO THE HEART OF
THE GRANITE STATUE,
AND FINDS...

NOW THAT WE ARE TRULY
FACE-TO-FACE, DEMON, WE
MAY CONCLUDE THIS
AFFAIR.

STAY BACK, STRANGE!
THE HATE I BEAR
YOU FOR CAUSING
LUDI'S DEATH...



...WILL NOT PREVENT
YOUR IMPRISONMENT
IN THIS BLOCK OF
MYSTIC AMBER.

YET EVEN AS
NINGAL IS DISPOSED
OF THE MOUNTING
ANGUISH AND
FRUSTRATION THAT
HAVE BUILT
WITHIN THE BREAST
OF DR. STRANGE--

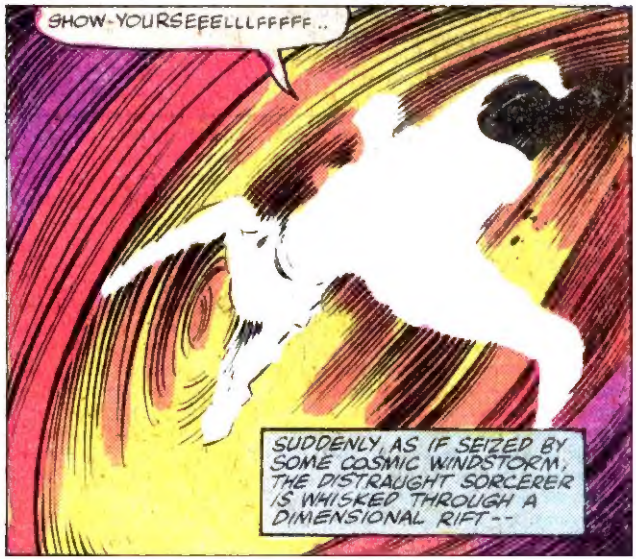


--BREAK IN A WAVE OF UNACCUSTOMED
ANGER THAT MOMENTARILY ENGULFS HIM.

HEAR ME, MY HIDDEN FOE-- MY TRUE FOE!
LET THERE BE AN END TO THIS PARADE
OF PHANTOMS! SHOW YOURSELF, THAT
WE MAY CONCLUDE OUR BATTLE!



SHOW-YOURESELFLLLLFFFFF..



SUDDENLY, AS IF SEIZED BY
SOME COSMIC WINDSTORM,
THE DISTRAGHT SORCERER
IS WHISKED THROUGH A
DIMENSIONAL RIFT--

--TO REJOIN HIS PHYSICAL BODY
WITHIN THE CONFINES OF GARRETT
CASTLE.

STEPHEN---
ARE YOU
HURT? I
WILL--

NO, CLEA, I AM ALL RIGHT,
THOUGH NO CLOSER TO
UNEARTHING OUR REAL
NEMESIS THAN WHEN WE
WERE ATTACKED BY THOSE
TRANSFORMED SEWER
WORKERS, WEEKS AGO. *

*DOC #30
--JUST JO.

AND THEN, AS IF TO INSURE THAT IT WILL
BE OF NO UNWILLING ASSISTANCE TO
THE BEMUSED SORCERER IN HIS
SEARCH...

CRRUMBLE

...THE BLACK KNIGHT'S
SILENT FIGURE CRUMBLES
INTO STONY FRAGMENTS,
LACKING THE ANIMATING
INFLUENCE OF NINGAL.

IF WE ARE TO BELIEVE WHAT
THOUGHARE TOLD US, THEN
OUR ENEMY "DWELLS" IN
THE DARKNESS" *

ODD... FOR THE BAREST SECOND,
WHILE I RAVED AT EMPTY SPACE
INSIDE THAT STATUE, I SEEMED TO
FEEL THE PRESENCE OF AN ENTITY
SO MALIGN, SO THOROUGHLY EVIL,
THAT THE MEREST BRUSH WITH
IT CHILLED MY SOUL.

*DOCTOR
STRANGE
#33 --JO.

BUT, I--I CANNOT BE
SURE, CLEA. SO MUCH HAS
EVADED ME OF LATE. I...

THE PLAY
IS ENDED,
D'SPAYRE.

BUT, GREAT DWELLER,
WHAT OF THE WORLD
YOU INTENDED TO
SMOTHER?

THAT WILL
WAIT, FOR NOW.

YOU SEE, STRANGE
HAS INTRIGUED ME
SINCE HE FIRST
CAME TO MY
ATTENTION.

HE IS THE ONE MORTAL
WHOSE PERCEPTION OF
REALITY COULD ALLOW
HIM TO UNCOVER MY
ULTIMATE INFLUENCE
AND EXPOSE IT
WITH THE LIGHT
OF TRUTH.

THUS, MY MANY
PAWNS KEPT HIS MIND
BURDENED WITH
MINOR MATTERS,
WHILE I SAPPED HIS
MAGNIFICENT RESOLVE
EACH TIME HE FACED
A NEW ANTAGONIST.

AND NOW, STRANGE WILL
FIND HE CANNOT CONFRONT
HIS FEAR AND OVERCOME IT, AS
HE SO DESPERATELY WISHES TO,
FOR I WILL NOT ALLOW IT.

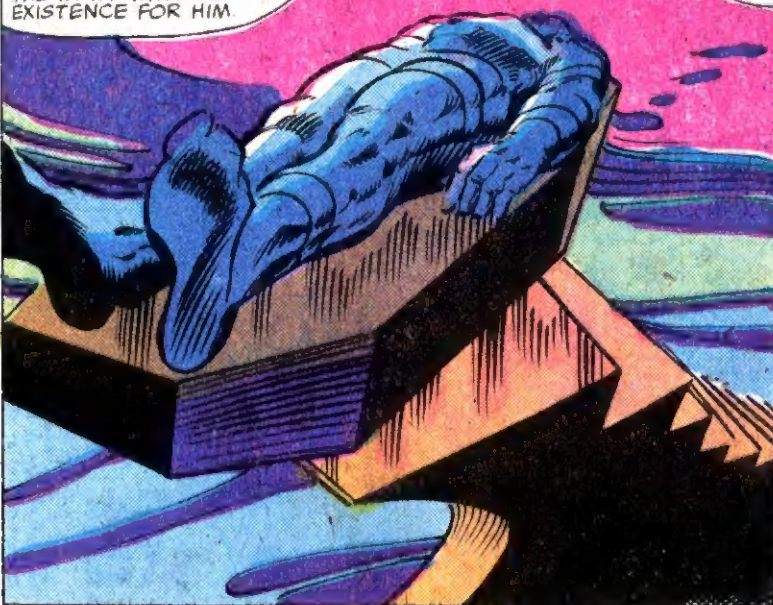
MOST MORTALS ARE LIKE CHILDREN, CAST ADRIPT ON THE STORM-TOSSED SEA OF INFINITY WITH ONLY THE DIM LIGHT OF THEIR FEEBLE SCIENCE TO GUIDE THEM.

STRANGE IS DIFFERENT. HE IS A TRUE MAGICIAN WHO HAS SENSED A DEEPER REALITY THAT CLARIFIES THE MANY WHYS OF EXISTENCE FOR HIM.

STRANGE BELIEVES IN A MYSTICAL WORLD-VIEW WHEREIN THE PRIMAL FEAR RECEDES BEFORE THE ETERNAL QUEST FOR TRUTH.

BUT I HAVE RETURNED THAT ELEMENT OF THE HORRIFYING UNKNOWN TO HIS LIFE, D'SPAYRE. I HAVE BLURRED THE REASSURING LANDMARKS AND LOOSENED THE VERY PILLARS OF HIS PERCEPTIONS.

HE DOUBTS HIS ABILITY AND HIS WORLD-VIEW, AND SO, HIMSELF. IN SHORT-- HE FEARS... AND FEARS DEEPLY.



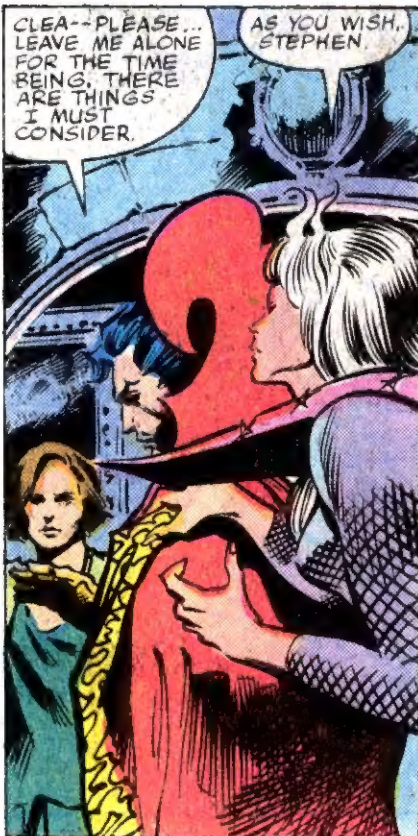
I HAVE WON MY DUEL WITH STRANGE!

BUT NOW, THERE ARE MORE PRESSING PURSUITS THAT REQUIRE MY ATTENTION.

WITH THAT, THE DWELLER, D'SPAYRE, AND THE GREAT HALLS OF FEAR DEPART FROM THIS SLIVER OF EXISTENCE TO CARRY THEIR MESSAGE ELSEWHERE.

CLEA--PLEASE... LEAVE ME ALONE FOR THE TIME BEING. THERE ARE THINGS I MUST CONSIDER.

AS YOU WISH, STEPHEN.



HE TURNS TOWARD THE WINDOW, STARING AT THE GATHERING FOG THAT OBSCURES HIS VIEW LESS THAN THE FEAR WHICH CLOUDS HIS HEART.

HE THINKS: "A SORCERER SUPREME HAS NO CHOICE BUT TO BECOME THE ULTIMATE WISE MAN... OR THE ULTIMATE PARANOID."

AND THROUGHOUT A LONG AND SLEEPLESS NIGHT HE PONDERES THOSE WORDS, AS THE THICK FOG CLOSES OVER THE ANCIENT CASTLE...

... AND REMAINS OPPRESSIVELY EVIDENT FOR MUCH OF THE FOLLOWING DAY.

